Guidance for the Leadership Development Bursary Scheme 2026/27

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Leadership Development Bursary Scheme has been established to support the professional growth and leadership development of leaders in grant-aided schools across Northern Ireland.

1.2 In 2026/27, the scheme is open to both middle leaders and experienced principals and forms part of the Enhanced Professional Learning Programme for both. These programmes have been developed under the Department of Education's TransformED Strategy and subsequent Teacher Professional Learning Strategy, *Leading Together for Excellence* and aim to strengthen leadership capacity across the education system.

1.3 **Please note that a bursary award does not guarantee admission to the programme of study. Applicants are responsible for applying directly to the relevant Higher Education Institution and meeting any entry requirements set by the institution.**

2.0 Purpose

2.1 The bursary programme will:

- Support leaders to undertake accredited professional learning at master's level.
- Enhance leadership knowledge, skills and capacity.
- Strengthen the leadership pipeline within schools in Northern Ireland.

3.0 Administration of the Scheme

3.1 The Department is responsible for the administration and delivery of the scheme. This includes managing the application process, assessment and selection arrangements, communications with applicants, payment of bursaries and monitoring and evaluation activities.

4.0 Value of the Bursary

4.1 The Department has allocated funding to support up to 100 middle leaders and 100 experienced principals annually through postgraduate bursaries. Each bursary will fund up to 30 Master's-level credits at participating Higher Education Institutions. The current indicative value is £1,284 per participant.

4.2 The bursary will:

- Cover tuition fees only.
- Be paid directly to the Higher Education Institution.
- Not include travel, accommodation, books or other incidental expenses.
- Not cover repeat modules or resubmission costs.

5.0 Eligibility

5.1 Applicants must:

- Be employed in a grant-aided school in Northern Ireland.

- For the middle leadership bursary, hold a substantive middle leadership role at the time of application. Applicants may be asked to provide evidence and the Department may contact your school's principal to provide verification.

- For the experienced principal bursary, hold a substantive principal post at the time of application and have a minimum of three years' experience as a principal. The required experience may have been gained through a combination of temporary and/or substantive principal appointments and does not need to have been continuous.

5.2 Examples of eligible middle leader roles include:

- Head of Department
- Curriculum Leader
- Subject Leader
- Key Stage Co-ordinator
- SEN Co-ordinator
- Literacy Co-ordinator
- Numeracy Co-ordinator
- Pastoral Leader (e.g. Head of Year, Head of Key Stage)

5.3 An individual may only be awarded a Leadership Development Bursary once. Applicants who have previously received support through the scheme are not eligible for further funding.

6.0 Eligible Programmes

6.1 The bursary may be used to support postgraduate modules or accredited programmes that contribute directly to educational leadership and school improvement.

6.2 Examples include modules within:

Queen's University Belfast

- MSc Educational Leadership
- MEd Education Studies
- Leadership-related modules within postgraduate programmes

Ulster University

- School Leadership Postgraduate Diploma
- Leadership for Learning
- Strategic Development Planning
- Building Teams and Managing Resources

Stranmillis University College

- PG Certificate: Leading Skills Development
- MEd Education Studies
- Master of Teaching

St Mary's University College

- PG Certificate in Enabling Educational Skills Development
- MEd programmes with leadership-focused modules

6.3 Other accredited programmes may be considered where applicants can demonstrate alignment to the objectives of the bursary scheme.

7.0 Selection Criteria

7.1 If the programme is oversubscribed, applications will be assessed against the following criteria:

Criteria	Weighting
Leadership impact: How will the module help to develop leadership practice.	40%
Alignment with school development plan (SDP) priorities: How will learning be applied within your school context to support achievement of SDP priorities.	40%
Outline how the module or programme of study aligns with the TransformED strategy and Leading Together for Excellence Teacher Professional Learning Strategy.	20%

8.0 Conditions of Award

8.1 Successful applicants will be required to:

- Maintain satisfactory participation and engagement with the programme.
- Complete the approved module(s).
- Notify the Department of Education of any withdrawal or change in circumstances.
- Share learning and impact within their school or professional network.
- Complete any evaluation activity required by the Department of Education.

8.2 Failure to meet these conditions may result in recovery of all or part of the bursary.

9.0 Monitoring and Evaluation

9.1 The Department will oversee the monitoring and evaluation of the bursary scheme.

9.2 As part of the wider Leadership Development Programme, bursary recipients may be asked to contribute to evaluation activities.

10.0 Key Dates (Indicative)

Activity	Timing
Scheme launch	16 November 2026
Applications open	16 November 2026
Applications close	27 November 2026